

Public Health Fact Sheet

Viral Meningitis



What is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is an infection of the meninges (a thin lining covering the brain and spinal cord) by any one of a number of different viruses. It is a fairly common disease. Almost all of the cases occur as single, isolated events. Outbreaks are rare.

Who gets viral meningitis?

Anyone can get viral meningitis but it occurs most often in children.

Which viruses cause this form of meningitis?

Approximately half of the cases in the United States are due to common enteroviruses (intestinal). Occasionally, children will have viral meningitis associated with mumps or herpes virus infection. Mosquito-borne viruses also account for a few cases each year. In many cases, the specific virus cannot be identified.

How are the viruses that cause viral meningitis spread?

Because a number of different viruses are capable of causing viral meningitis, the manner in which the virus is spread depends upon the type of virus involved. Some are spread by person-to-person contact; others can be spread by insects.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms may include fever, headache, stiff neck and fatigue. Rash, sore throat and intestinal symptoms may also occur.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms generally appear within one week of exposure.

Is a person with viral meningitis contagious?

Some of the enteroviruses that cause viral meningitis are contagious while others, such as mosquito-borne viruses, cannot be spread from person to person. Fortunately, most people exposed to these viruses experience mild or no symptoms. Most people are exposed to these viruses at some time in their lives, but few actually develop meningitis.

Should a person with viral meningitis be isolated?

Strict isolation is not necessary. Since most cases are due to enteroviruses that may be passed in the stool, people diagnosed with viral meningitis should be instructed to thoroughly wash their hands after using the toilet.

How is viral meningitis treated?

There are no specific medicines or antibiotics used to treat viral meningitis.